'Medieval' Musics of Asia
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'Medieval' Musics of Asia

LAURENCE PICKEN

THE DOCUMENTATION of many aspects of early musical history is substantially fuller, and extends further backwards in time, in Asia than in Europe. This is so for the history of secular music in general, for the history of musical forms and melody types, as well as for the history of instruments, of playing techniques, and of ornamentation. Assyriologists, and musicologists with some knowledge of and competence in Assyriology, have recently demonstrated that the Babylonians were already familiar with the seven diatonic modes of the European tradition in the second millennium B.C., and there exists a Hurrian cuneiform tablet of 1400 B.C. bearing words and music of a hymn to the goddess Nikkal, wife of the Moon-God.[1] The concern of this paper, however, is with South and East Asia, rather than with Western Asia and the Ancient Fertile Crescent, and in both East and South Asia numerous documentary sources carry us back to a point in time in musical history some five or six centuries earlier than equivalent European sources. From the standpoint of the historian of Western music, what is perhaps most astonishing is the existence of a substantial body of *secular* instrumental music of the eighth and early ninth centuries, surviving in score, in mensural tablatures, in documents in part themselves written in the ninth and tenth centuries, or now available in copies made not later than the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

In East Asia, as in the Middle East, sophisticated urban monody is culturally dominant to rural polyphony. In order to hear the polyphonic playing of Thai or Laotian free-reed mouth-organs, it is necessary to go to the countryside; just as in Turkey, if one wishes to hear the polyphony of plucked or bowed lutes, or double-chanter bagpipes, one has to go to rural areas, remote from the towns.[2] In accordance with this pre-eminence of monody, the notations of East and South Asia have been devised for the writing of melody only. For the purpose of writing down melodies, all that is required is some kind of visual linear sequence of signs, corresponding to the temporal sequence of pitches. The orientation of such melody-lines of notation follows that of writing: horizontal in India, vertical in East Asia. Most commonly the notations for different instruments are tablatures, and the signs are such things as fingerhole names on flutes and other pipes, string numbers on zithers, fret positions on lutes; and such notations are not even relative-pitch notations. One has to specify tuning (of stringed instruments) or size (of winds) for the notation to acquire a fixed-pitch meaning. Occasionally, such a tablature is converted by time to a notation in fixed pitches, when (for example) only one size of flute survives where once there were several. And very occasionally we have, as in India, note-names given to a standard diatonic octave-species, so that the note-names can be used to specify intervals; or as in China, Japan, and Korea, note-names that indicate absolute pitches.

The oldest document to be considered here is a rock-inscribed musical text of

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some 2,500 notes from Kuḍumiyāmalai in South India assigned, on epigraphical grounds, to the early seventh century A.D. The music covers a range of two octaves, specifies in which octave a note is to be taken and, by changes of vowel in the sol-fa-like syllable that indicates the note-degree, shows the direction of movement of the melody from note to note.[3] The musical text is laid out in groups of four relative-pitch symbols, and it is believed that these groups are measures of four notes of equal duration. Furthermore, the text is subdivided into seven sections, each in a different named, seven-note, diatonic mode. The wide leaps in the melodic line suggest instrumental rather than vocal performance. A feature of the musical structure is that the most important notes of the mode act as measure-finals in the four-beat measures in successive lines of each melody. For instance, in the sixth section, *c* is the final note of every measure for the first sixteen measures, *d* is measure-final for the next sixteen measures, *a* for the next sixteen measures, and *f* – the final of the mode – for the last sixteen measures. According to a colophon, the inscription was carved 'for the benefit of pupils', and it therefore provides paradigms for seven modes, each exemplified in an extended melody. These melodies were perhaps intended as models for improvised melodic development; indeed, there seems to be a connection between the melodic style and systematic permutation and combination of notes of a *rāga*, still practised in India today.

There exist twelve Chinese ritual melodies in equal notes, in measures of four, attributed to the eighth century; but these first appear in printed form in a work by the Song Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhu Xi, posthumously printed in about 1220,[4] and it is primarily to the early secular musics of East Asia that this paper seeks to draw attention.

A veritable treasury of early secular music in score is to be found in Japan. The stimulus to the assembling of such a collection of scores, in tablatures for five different instruments, was given by entertainments presented, with great *panache*, at the Chinese Court in the Sui and Tang Dynasties, between the sixth and early ninth centuries, and witnessed by a succession of Japanese missions to China. The last of these missions for a period of three centuries left Japan in 834–5 and reached China in 838. One of the officers of the mission was a musician, Fujiwara Sadatoshi, and he had been ordered to find a lute master with whom to study. His distinguished teacher, known to Chinese records, was then eighty-five years of age. At the conclusion of the lessons, he presented Sadatoshi with a manuscript summarising his teaching, and to this Sadatoshi added a colophon, dated in the year 838 of the Tang. A copy of this manuscript, written by the Japanese Prince Sadayasu in 920–21, with an augmented preface and a few interpolated comments in the body of the text, survives in the Library of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo (*Kunaichō Shoryōbu*).[5] The manuscript is (in effect) a lute tutor for a finger-plucked, four-stringed lute with four frets. The tutor gives instructions for performing 27 different tunings, provides 27 brief tuning-testing pieces in tablature, and defines a number of finger techniques. In addition, it includes 13 extended preludes in three mode-keys. In terms of octave-species these are Dorian and Mixolydian on A, and Dorian on E. This

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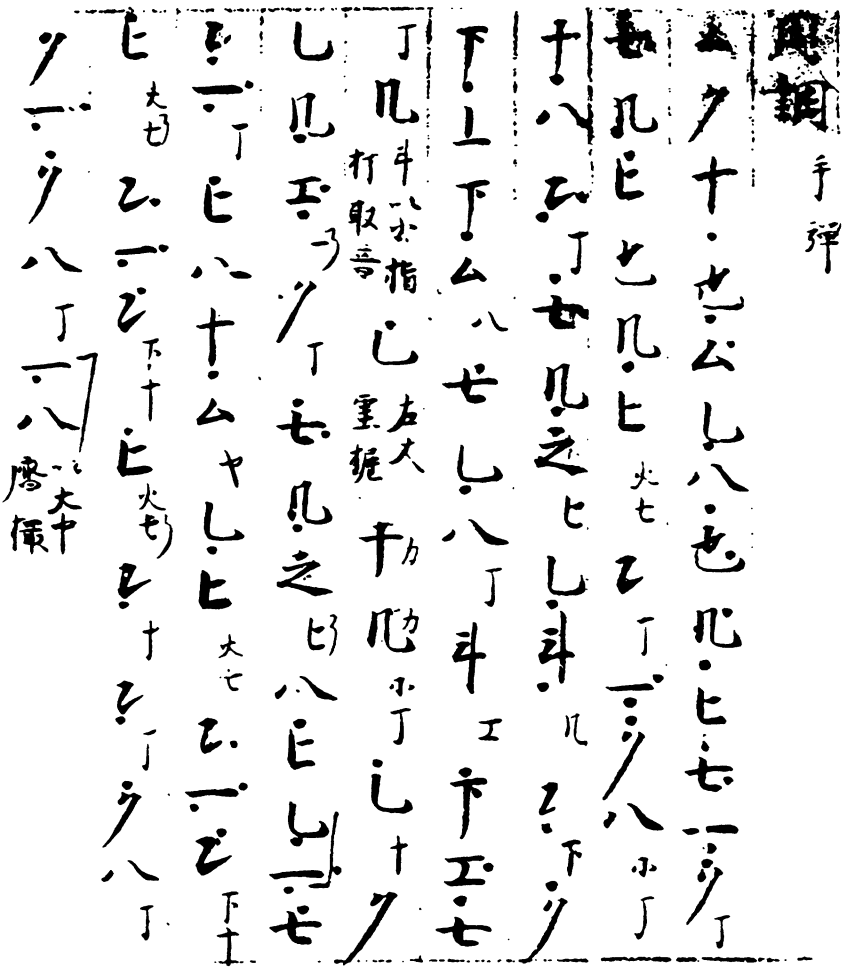
last prelude is shown below, and is transcribed as ex. 1. The specific fingering of about half the notes is indicated in the manuscript. A particularly arresting feature is the quasi-contrapuntal linear texture.

These lute preludes may be regarded as belonging to the repertory of art music. But the bulk of the treasure preserved in Japan is not merely secular but popular and even vulgar in character. The Imperial House of Tang may have been Turkic rather than Chinese in origin, and this may have accounted for the ready acceptance at Court of much that the following Dynasty of the Song rejected. Be that as it may, the Japanese, overawed and impressed by the ostentation of the Chinese Court, seem never to have appreciated the true character of what they were watching and hearing. They accepted everything,



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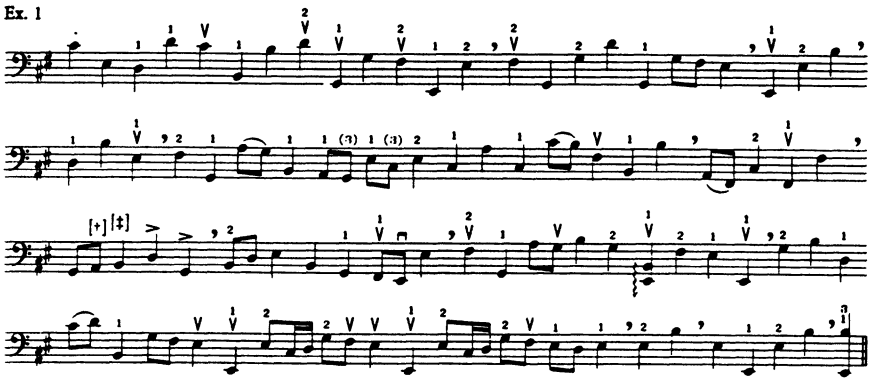
Ex. 1

Fingered modal prelude in *Huangzhong-diao* (*Fushimi-no-miya bon biwa-fu*/Lute-Score of the Fushimi-no-miya Family; sheet 12, columns 10–12; sheet 13, columns 1–7; transcribed by R. F. Wolpert, *op. cit.*, 1977, p. 164). 1 = thumb, 2 = first finger, 3 = second finger; V = pluck string outwards with nail; ⊓ = pluck string inwards with flesh of finger-tip or ball of thumb; [†] = percuss with little finger to obtain note; [‡] = left thumb plucks; › = short pause. Notes without figures are plucked with the second finger; this is marked as (3) where first finger might be expected. The fingering of the final chord is shown explicitly.

whether Sogdian drinking songs or other foreign comic pantomimes and even pieces on lewd themes, as utterly refined, since it came from the Chinese Court. And they have preserved, albeit in modified form, perhaps 90% of the repertory as listed by title in Chinese sources. Just under half of the pieces survive in a manuscript in flute tablature, compiled (in 966) from an earlier collection of flute scores prepared in 921 by that same Prince Sadayasu who wrote the surviving manuscript copy of the lute tutor already referred to. Forty-six of these pieces, in mode-keys corresponding to Mixolydian, Aeolian, and Dorian, octave-species in several keys, have already been published in transcription.[6] Some of the items in this collection are suites in six or seven movements, performed as ballets at the Tang Court.

An example of the single movements preserved is 'Collecting Kingfisher-Feathers' (such feathers were used in embroidery and in the making of jewellery). This is available, for example, in the flute part from 966, a mouth-organ part from 1244, and in lute and zither parts from manuscripts written about 1170 (*Sango-yōroku* and *Jinchi-yōroku*). All four manuscripts are preserved in later copies. This particular example is of interest because of its relationship to a song from another branch of Japanese Court music. In addition to the Tang music (*Tōgaku*), there survives from the later Heian Period (897–1185) the repertory of 'Drovers' Songs' (*Saibara*), traditionally believed to have arisen from the songs of pack-horse drivers bringing the rice-tribute to the capital. The lute and zither manuscripts of *c.* 1170 (already mentioned) include two further repertories, in addition to *Tōgaku*: one is some fifty Drovers' Songs, never transcribed by Japanese scholars, since time has obliterated knowledge of how to read these tablatures, and there is good reason to believe that most of

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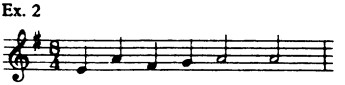
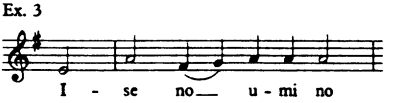
the songs have never been sung since the fourteenth century. Six of them were wrongly reconstructed in the Edo period, beginning in the seventeenth century. The entire repertory has now been transcribed from the lute and zither parts of *Sango-yōroku* and *Jinchi-yōroku*.[7]

From early times, some of the Drovers' Songs have been linked – indeed, paired off – with Tang-music tunes. In fact, what the Sino-Japanese texts state is that they are 'the same tune' (*dō on*). Such is the difference, however, between the few *Saibara* still performed and the corresponding Tang-music pieces, as performed today, that no one has hitherto believed this. It has been supposed that they were, perhaps, paired off so that they could conveniently be played in sequence without having to re-tune lutes and zithers. It has now been shown, however, that if one goes back to the Tang-music scores in their earliest condition, the *Saibara* melody is, in fact, to greater or lesser extent, the same as its Tang-music partner.[7] Sometimes changes in note-durations are made; sometimes new material is substituted or interpolated. Such changes may be related to the problems that arose in attempting to sing Japanese song-texts of fewer syllables to tunes originally devised for Chinese texts with more syllables.

In the group of Drovers' Songs in the minor mode, one that survives in performance to the present, albeit in reconstructed form, is associated with the same locality as the national Shintō shrine at Ise: 'By the sea at Ise, on the pure strand, as the tide retreats, picking seaweed, gathering shellfish, I would find a pearl'. This was linked with the Tang-music tune 'Collecting Kingfisher-Feathers'. It is indeed the same tune slightly altered.[7] The first phrase of the Tang-music tune is shown as ex. 2. The Drovers' Song 'By the sea at Ise' (*Ise no*

Ex. 2

umi) places the first note in an anacrusis position and lengthens both it and the following note (ex. 3). A note in a mouth-organ score of 1244 states, in relation to 'Collecting Kingfisher-Feathers', 'For the title 'By the sea at Ise' play seven times', demonstrating that the relationship between the melodies was still known as late as the thirteenth century.[8]

Ex. 3

The third branch of the Japanese Court repertory, preserved in scores for lute and zither of *c.* 1170, is that of 'Korean Music' (*Komagaku*). No trace of this early music survives in Korea; and the only feature shared with later Korean music, from the fifteenth century to the present, is that the rhythm is binary, and the main bass drum beat falls on the first beat of the measure, whereas in Tang music it never does so. It has now been shown[9] that tunes to which *Saibara* texts were sung were borrowed both from the Tang and from the early Korean

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repertory. A Korean piece, 'Earth Endures' (*Chi-kyū*) is linked, for example, with 'The Mountains of Mino': 'On the mountains of Mino, at the Festival of New Rice, those luxuriantly upward-thrusting oaks to see again, what happiness! To see again, what happiness!'. Our sole primary sources for the early Korean repertory are the manuscripts of *c.* 1170.

In the Chinese tradition, only two song-melodies, reputedly dating from the Tang period, survive. They were printed in 1202 with new words written by the poet-composer Jiang Kui.[10] One of them, in a Mixolydian mode, is stated to have been a lute tune. After transcription from the Chinese notation for flute, the melody lies conveniently on the frets of the Chinese lute, *piba*, if the lute is tuned as for the stated mode.[11]

While on a visit to India in the winter of 1975–76, Widdess[12] was able to photograph an unpublished manuscript, the only known copy of a treatise on music written about 1100 A.D. This source contains over 300 melodies illustrating early Indian *rāgas* and, in addition, 14 sacred art songs in a form otherwise known only from descriptions in literary texts. These 14 songs are written in the same modes as the Kuḍumiyāmalai Inscription (p. 58) and may therefore be some four or five centuries older than the source in which they now survive – say, seventh or eighth century A.D. Literary sources as early as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (compiled in the early centuries A.D.) describe such long, complex songs in many sections, each section having a different rhythmic structure. This structure could be indicated in performance by hand-gestures – both silent movements and audible claps – executed by the singers or ancillary performers. These showed where one was in the rhythmic scheme, and no doubt helped to co-ordinate the ensembles of instrumentalists, singers and dancers seen in early Indian iconography. The patterns of hand-movements were written down and survive in a thirteenth-century treatise (*Saṅgītaratnākara*); but no examples of the melodies of these songs were known until 14 examples were identified in the treaties of 1100.

The Burmese do not have a system of musical notation. They name their notes, but seem never to have made use of these names to record melodies. We cannot therefore expect to find there scores of songs or instrumental melodies prior to the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, there survives in the Chinese history of the Tang period, compiled in the first years of the eleventh century, an account of an orchestra from Pyū, possibly with Mon performers. Both peoples, Pyū and Mon, contributed greatly to the development of Burmese culture as we now know it. This orchestra, along with singers and dancers, performed twelve pieces at the Imperial Chinese Court in 802, when Pyū was tributary to Tang. The pieces were all expositions of stories from Buddhist scriptures and discourses (*sūtras* and *śāstras*). The eleventh-century account gives a fairly detailed description of 22 different types of instruments, including two harps, some in two sizes, played by 35 musicians in all. Moreover, the account specifies, in Chinese absolute pitches, the scaling of the winds (flutes and free-reed mouth-organs), the open-string pitches of the stick-zithers, and the pitches of free-reed drone instruments. The scaling was Mixolydian (diatonic with

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flattened seventh), starting on *e♭* or *a♭*; and the drones were *e♭* and *b♭*.[13] Winds of the free-reed mouth-organ type are of course fixed in pitch. With such a set of instruments, therefore, it can only have been possible to play in a very limited number of diatonic modes in a very limited number of keys; and a change of mode necessarily brought with it a change of key. Though traditionally the Burmese had no pitch notation, it has been shown that they sometimes make use of an effective mnemonic consisting of a two-dimensional plot of the metrical structure, in which the beats of clapper, clashed bell-cymbals, and (in some metres) silences, are distinguished.[14] With this pattern are associated the syllables of the song text. The oldest known such text is believed to have been written in the fourteenth century.

A major part of the Burmese musical repertory consists of songs sung with instrumental accompaniment, including harp and xylophone, preserved by the court musicians and today by their rapidly vanishing pupils and *their* pupils. A part of this repertory has been intensively studied over the past decade, and the first 13 *Kyò* Songs (*kyò* – string) for voice and harp have been published in transcription.[15] These songs are all in what is believed to be the oldest of the four harp tunings. This is pentatonic over the two lower octaves, but with tetrachords consisting of major third and minor second, recalling similar scalings in Bhutan, Indonesia, and Japan. A very striking feature is the two-part harmonic relationship between voice and harp. This arises in the following way. A limited number of degrees of the mode, approximating to tonic, mediant, and subdominant, act as cadences at the end of musical lines; and since the harp supports these cadences with the fifth below in cadential figures extending over two measures: fifth → octave → fifth below → octave (in notes of minim duration) – the ear is aware of each such cadence not merely as a particular note, but as occurring in a particular tonality, defined by harp and voice. For this reason, it is convenient and proper to distinguish each cadence as belonging to a particular 'tonal level' in accordance with a discrimination of 'levels' made by the Burmese themselves.[15] Modulation between tonal levels is frequent. Examination of the overall structure of the songs[16] suggests that later song forms have developed in amplification of an archetype related, in its binary organization at all structural levels, to types of song text present in the earliest Chinese ritual repertory of the first millennium B.C.[17]

From a Western viewpoint, one of the most surprising facts relating to East Asian music is the use by the Koreans, since the fifteenth century, of full scores, with simultaneous display of melodies in absolute pitch notation, four different kinds of drum stroke, clappers, and song text, laid out on a grid of vertical columns of thirty-two squares. The entire Court repertory of the Dynasty (Yi) that came into being six generations before King Sejong is preserved in this way in the block-printed *Veritable Records of Sejong*, completed in 1454. The Court songs and dances run, in some instances, to extraordinary lengths – one item, for example, is 2403 bars long. One might well suppose these columns of thirty-two squares to be equi-durational subdivisions of a single binary measure – say, demisemiquavers of a common-time bar; but if this is assumed, transcription

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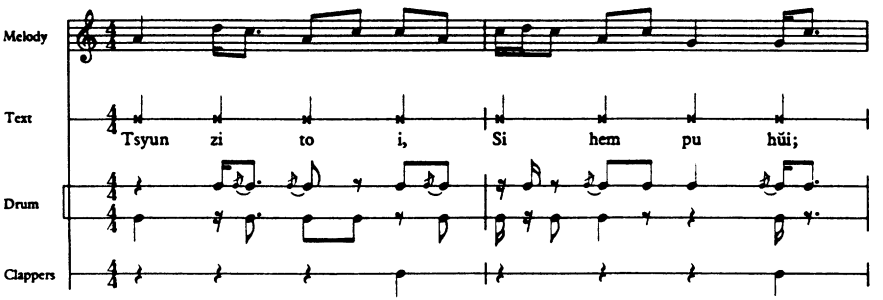
Ex. 4

yields very extraordinary music. (This is indeed the way in which scores of later Korean Court music are to be read.) It has been argued convincingly, however, that in Sejong's day, although the quarter-column and the half-column were units of duration, the squares functioned as rhythmic slots.[18] Furthermore, both ternary and binary readings may be called for. A common signature is 36/16, with each quaver subdivided into three semiquavers, and these in turn could be subdivided in twos. But the total of 72 demisemiquavers was theoretical only; in Korean melodies, within each of the four groups of three triplets the first two semiquavers of the second triplet were never subdivided. The total number of squares (32) is not half the number of *durational units*, but half the number of *rhythmic slots*. In the particular rhythmic style of the ternary pieces, the number of available rhythmic slots is less than the number of durational units, and there can be little doubt that the notation was specifically designed with the ternary pieces in mind.

In the Song Dynasty, however, the Koreans received from the Chinese a small number of march-like pieces, suggestively classed in a group entitled 'Drumming and Blowing', and these, in King Sejong's scores are (as were the Chinese originals) binary. As might be anticipated, when notated in the grid designed for use with ternary melodies, the binary melodies leave many squares unoccupied. It is to be emphasised that the full scores of the Koreans owe nothing to Chinese, or indeed to any other East Asian, precedent. Examples 4 and 5[18] show, respectively, the opening of a 'Drumming and Blowing' piece, 'Rumbling and Flashing', and of a ternary piece, 'The Cry of the *Feng*'.[19] A further Korean block-printed score of the fifteenth century is notated in a system that specifies neither absolute nor relative pitch, but position relative to a central note. Specification of mode and key was necessary to reading the notation. Furthermore, song texts in this volume, *Current Korean Music* (*c* 1500), are in Korean (rather than Chinese) and written in the syllabary created by King Sejong. They include popular songs and possibly true folksongs, as well as shamanistic songs for exorcistic rites.[20]

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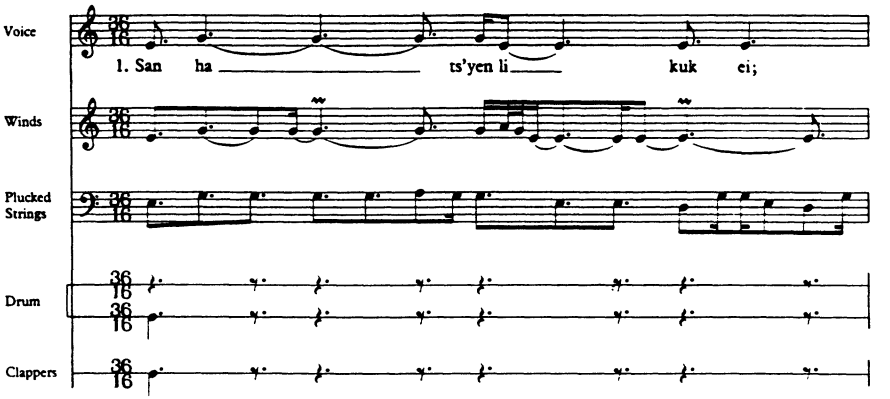
Ex. 5

Pieces performed during the lecture were: *Kaiśikamadhyame catuṣprahārasvarāgamāḥ*, transcribed by D. R. Widdess from the Kuḍumiyāmalai Inscription; tuning-piece and finger-plucked modal prelude for lute from the *Fushimi-no-miya bon biwa-fu* of 838 in the copy of 920–21 transcribed by R. F. Wolpert; *Jūsuiraku* (Tang Music), transcribed by A. J. Marett, L. E. R. Picken, and Elizabeth Markham; *Ise no umi* (*Saibara*) transcribed by Elizabeth Markham; *Chi-kyū* (*Komagaku*), transcribed by Elizabeth Markham; *Minoyama* (*Saibara*), transcribed by Elizabeth Markham; *You zheng shi chun gui* by Jiang Kui (1202), transcribed by L. E. R. Picken; *Karaṇā-pāṇikā*, transcribed from the Poona manuscript by D. R. Widdess; first *Kyó* song, transcribed by Muriel C. Williamson; *Tsinyo* and *Ponghoangŭm* from *Sejong Sillok* (1454), and *Sanghoa-dyem* from *Siyong hyangak po* (*c.* 1500), transcribed by J. Condit.

The performers were Muriel C. Williamson (clappers, bell-cymbals), Margaret Widdess (clarinet), Christabel Bridge (voice), Dr R. H. S. Carpenter (voice), Elizabeth Markham (*koto*/zither), Andrea Nixon (guitar), D. R. Widdess, (*pakwāj*/drum; clappers; *saung-gauk*/Burmese harp), Michael Good (bassoon), Dr N. Swindale (flute), L. E. R. Picken (*shō*/mouth-organ; harpsichord). The harp played by Mr Widdess was generously lent by Colonel T. W. Baynes. Other instruments were loaned by the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

NOTES

1 For a recent account, with full bibliography, see Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin, 'Déchiffrement de la musique babylonienne', in *Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura*, Quaderno no. 236 (1977), 1–24.

2 Laurence Picken, 'Instrumental Polyphonic Folk Music in Asia Minor', in *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, lxxx (1953–4), 73–86; and *Folk Musical Instruments of Turkey* (London, 1975), 232ff, 303ff, 537ff.

3 D. Richard Widdess, 'The Kuḍumiyāmalai Inscription: a Source of early Indian Music in Notation', *Musica Asiatica*, ii (1979), in press.

4 'Twelve Ritual Melodies of the Tang Dynasty', *Studia memoriae Belae Bartók sacra*, ed. B. Rajeczky and L. Vargyas (Budapest, 1956, 1957), 147–73.

5 Rembrandt F. Wolpert, 'A Ninth-Century Sino-Japanese Lute-Tutor', *Musica Asiatica*, i (1977), 111–65.
Allan J. Marett, 'Tunes Notated in Flute-Tablature from a Japanese Source of the Tenth Century', *Musica Asiatica*, i (1977), 1–59.

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7 Elizabeth Markham: work as yet unpublished.
8 Observation by L.E.R.P.
9 See footnote 7.
10 'Secular Chinese Songs of the Twelfth Century', *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientarum Hungaricae*, viii (1966), 125–72; see pp. 141, 143. A revision of Song 3, with equi-syllabic English translation by Arthur Cooper, is given in the latter's *Li Po and Tu Fu* (Penguin Classics, 1973). 34–5.
11 Observation by R. F. Wolpert.
12 Nānyadeva: *Sarasvatīhṛdayālaṃkāra*. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona. Govt. MS 111 of 1869–70, under title *Bharatabhāṣya*. Photographed by courtesy of the librarian.
13 Denis C. Twitchett and Anthony H. Christie, 'A Medieval Burmese Orchestra', *Asia Major*, vii (1959), 176–95. The pitches are there given as sharps rather than flats.
14 Muriel C. Williamson, 'The Basic Tune of a Late Eighteenth-Century Burmese Classical Song', *Musica Asiatica*, ii (1979), in press.
15 Muriel C. Williamson, 'Aspects of Traditional Style Maintained in Burma's first 13 *Kyò* Songs', *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, ii (1975), 117–64.
16 See footnote 14.
17 'The Shapes of the *Shi Jing* song-texts and their Musical Implications', *Musica Asiatica*, i (1977), 85–109.
18 Jonathan Condit, 'A Fifteenth-Century Korean Score in Mensural Notation', *Musica Asiatica*, ii (1979), in press; *Sources for Korean music 1450–1600*, (diss., U. of Cambridge, 1976).
19 A mythical auspicious bird resembling a super cock-pheasant. Its appearance presaged the coming of a sage-king.
20 See Condit, *Sources for Korean Music*.

Postscript

Dr W. E. Skillend (London School of Oriental and African Studies) confirms that the source of popular songs, *Current Korean Music* (*Siyong hyangak po*), is a *block-print* believed, on internal evidence, to have been printed about 1500. Three copies of the original manuscript of the *Veritable Records of Sejong* (*Sejong sillok*), completed 1452–54, were printed with movable type in 1466–72, and one of these survives. The scores themselves were hand-copied in the printed versions of the *Veritable Records* but block-printed in *Current Korean Music*.

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